

THE HILLMAN

An Unusual Love Story

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

CHAPTER XVII—Continued.

"You silly child!" Louise exclaimed. "No one told me you were here. Have you had any lunch?"

"Long ago," Sophie replied. "I have been finishing your accounts."

"Louise made a little grimace. 'Tell me the worst,' she begged."

"You are overdrawn at your bank, your bills are heavier than ever this month, and there are five or six special accounts—one for some electric fittings, another for the hire of a motor-car—which ought to be paid."

Louise was looking up at the ceiling. She sighed.

"It would be nice," she said, "to have someone to pay one's bills and look after one, and see that one wasn't too extravagant."

"Well, you need someone badly," Sophie asserted. "I suppose you mean to make up your mind to it some day."

"I wonder!" Louise murmured. "Did you know that that terrible man from the hills—John Strangewy's brother—has been here this morning? He frightened me to death."

"What did he want?" Sophie asked curiously.

"He was a trifle vague," Louise remarked. "I gathered that if I don't send John back to Cumberland, he's going to strangle me."

Sophie leaned across the table.

"Are you going to send him back?" she asked.

"I am in an uncertain frame of mind," Louise confessed. "I really can't decide about anything."

"I want to tell you this, Louise," Sophie said firmly. "John is getting to know a great many people, and you know how men talk at the clubs. Aren't you sometimes afraid that he will hear things and misunderstand?"

"I am expecting it every day," Louise admitted.

"Then why don't you end it?"

"Which way?"

There was a silence between the two women. The muffled street noises from outside became the background to a stillness which grew every moment more oppressive. Louise returned to her former attitude. She looked steadfastly before her, her face supported by her hands.

Sophie grew paler and paler as the minutes passed. There was something strange and almost beautiful in Louise's face, something which had come from her lately, and which shone from her eyes only at rare intervals.

"You care for him, I believe?" Sophie cried at last. "You care for him?"

Louise did not move.

"Why not?" she whispered.

There was a ring at the front door. Louise, from her place, could see the long, gray bonnet of John's car. Almost before she could speak, he was announced.

"It's an atrocious time to come, I know—" he began apologetically.

"You're in time for some coffee, anyhow," Sophie told him cheerfully. "And I know Louise is glad to see you, because if you hadn't come, I was going to make her go through some accounts."

"You know I am always glad to see you," Louise murmured, pointing to a chair. "Sophy and I have been having a most interesting discussion, but we have come to a cul de sac."

"I really came," John explained, "to ask if you cared to come and see a collection of pictures. There's an Italian—a futurist, of course—just unpacked his little lot and set them up over a curiosity shop in Clifford street. He is sending out cards for next week, but I could take you today—that is, if you would care about it. We can go somewhere for some tea afterward."

Louise made a little grimace.

"What bad luck!" she exclaimed.

She stopped short. She felt that by her hesitation she had, in a sense, committed herself.

"I have promised to go and have tea with the prince at Seyre House," she said. "It is an engagement we made last week."

John set down his empty coffee cup with a clatter. An inexplicable but dominating fury seemed to have suddenly assailed him. He took out a cigarette and tried to light it. Sophie, after watching him for a moment in astonishment, slipped out of the room. Louise came over to his side.

"Are you really so much disappointed?" she asked. "I am so sorry! If I had known that you were coming for me, I would have kept myself free."

"It isn't that exactly," John answered. "It's something I can't altogether explain. If you don't mind, I think I must put right."

He left without another word. She watched him step into his new motor-car and drive away a little recklessly, considering the crowded state of the streets. He drew up, a few minutes later, outside the club in Pall Mall, where, as he chanced, he had lunched that day with the prince of Seyre.

He found the prince still sitting in the smoking room, reading a review, over the top of which he glanced up as John approached, and nodded nonchalantly.

"Back again?" he murmured.

"I came back to have a word with you, prince."

"Delighted!"

"Not long ago," John went on, "in this room, someone—I think it was Major Charteris—asked you what you were doing this afternoon. You replied that you were engaged. There were several other persons, and they began to chaff you. Perhaps I joined in—I don't remember. I think that it was Major Charteris who asked you, to see how you would answer."

"I don't know whether your appointment with a lady," John replied to the affirmative. There was a loud volley of chaff. You listened without contradiction to many references concerning the lady and the afternoon's engagement."

The prince nodded slightly. His face remained quite expressionless.

"As a matter of fact," John concluded, "I have discovered by the purest accident that Miss Maurel is to be your guest this afternoon at Seyre House."

The prince inclined his head gently. He remained monosyllabic.

"Well?"

John frowned heavily.

"Can't you see," he went on bluntly, "that if any one of those men who were present, and heard what was said about your guest, found out afterward that it was Miss Maurel who came to see you—well, I need not go on, need I? I am sure you understand. The things which were hinted at could not possibly apply to her. Would you mind sending a note to Miss Maurel and asking her to have tea with you some other afternoon?"

"And why the deuce should I do that?" the prince asked, a trifle paler, but entirely self-possessed.

"To oblige me," John replied.

The prince wiped his eyeglass carefully upon his handkerchief.

"Mr. Strangewy, you are a very amiable young man," he said equably, "to whom I have tried to show some kindness for Miss Maurel's sake. I really do not see, however—pardon my putting it plainly—what business this is of yours."

"It is my business," John declared, "because I have asked Miss Maurel to be my wife, and because I am hoping that some day, before very long, she will consent."

"The prince sat quite still in his chair, his eyes fixed upon a certain spot in the carpet. He had not even the appearance of being engaged in thought. He seemed only steeped in a sort of passivity. Finally, with a sigh, he rose to his feet.

"My young friend," he decided, "your statement alters the situation. I did not credit you with matrimonial intentions. I must see what can be done."

His lips relaxed ever so slightly—so slightly that they showed only a glimpse of his teeth in one straight, smile.

She was in some great empty space, breathing wonderful things. She was on the hilltops, and from the heights she looked down at herself as she had been—a poor little white-faced puppet, strutting about an overheated stage, in a fetid atmosphere of adulation, with a brain artificially stimulated, and a heart growing cold with selfishness. She pitied herself as she had been. Then she opened her eyes with a start of joy.

"How wonderful it all is!" she murmured. "You brought me here to tell me this?"

"And to hear something!" he insisted.

"I have tried not to, John," she confessed, amazed at the tremble of her sweet, low voice. Her words seemed like the confession of a weeping child. "I cannot help it. I do love you! I have tried not to so hard, but now—now I shall not try any more!"

She drove quietly down the long hill and through the dripping streets. Not another word passed between them till they drew up outside her door. She felt a new timidity as he handed her out, an immense gratitude for his firm tone and intuitive tact.

"No, I won't come in, thanks," he declared. "You have so little time to rest and get ready for the theater."

"You will be there tonight?" she asked.

He laughed as if there were humor in the suggestion of his absence.

"Of course!"

He slipped in his clutch and drove off through the rain-gleaming streets with the smile and air of a conqueror. Louise passed into her little house to find a visitor waiting for her there.

Eugene, prince of Seyre, had spent the early part of that afternoon in a manner wholly strange to him. In pursuance of an order given to his majordomo immediately on his return from his club after lunch, the great reception room of Seyre House, the picture gallery and the ballroom were prepared as if for a reception. Dust-sheets were swept aside, masterpieces of painting and sculpture were uncovered, the soft brilliance of concealed electric lights lit up many dark corners.

He was forty-one years old that day, and the few words which John had spoken to him barely an hour ago had made him realize that there was only one thing in life that he desired. The sight of his treasures merely soothed his vanity. It left empty and unsatisfied his fuller and deeper desire of living. He told himself that his time had come. Others of his race had paid a great price for the things they had coveted in life. He, too, must follow their example.

He was in Louise's drawing-room when she returned—Louise, with hair and cheeks a little damp, but with a wonderful light in her eyes and with footsteps that seemed to fall upon air.

"Some tea and a bath this moment, Alaine!" she called out, as she ran lightly up the stairs. "Never mind about dinner, I am so late. I will have some toast. Be quick!"

"Madame!" Alaine began.

"Don't bother me about anything now," Louise interrupted. "I will throw my things off while you get the bath ready."

She stepped into her little room, throwing off her cloak as she entered. Then she stopped short, almost upon the threshold. The prince had risen to his feet.

"Eugene!"

He came toward her. Even as he stooped to kiss her fingers, his eyes

seemed to take in her disheveled condition, the little patches of color in her cheeks, the radiant happiness which shone in her eyes.

"I am not an unwelcome intruder, I hope," he said. "But how wet you are!"

The fingers which he released fell nervously to her side. She stood looking at him as if confronted with a sudden nightmare. It was as if this new-found life were being slowly drained from her veins.

"You are overfired," he murmured, leading her with solicitude toward an easy chair. "One would imagine, from your appearance, that I was the bearer of some terrible tidings. Let me assure you that it is not so."

He spoke with his usual deliberation, but she seemed powerless to recover herself. She was still dazed and white. She sank into the chair and looked at him.

"Nothing, I trust," she declared hastily. "I am tired. I run upstairs perhaps a little too quickly. Alaine had not told me that there was anyone here."

"I had a fancy to see you this afternoon," the prince explained, "and, finding you out, I took the liberty of waiting. If you would rather I went away and came for you later, please do not hesitate to say so."

"Of course not!" she exclaimed. "I do not know why I should have been so silly. Alaine, take my coat and veil," she directed, turning to the maid, who was lingering at the other end of the room. "I am not wet. Serve some tea in here. I will have my bath later, when I change to go to the theater."

She spoke bravely, but fear was in her heart. She tried to tell herself that this visit was a coincidence, that it meant nothing, but all the time she knew otherwise.

The door closed behind Alaine, and they were alone. The prince, as if anxious to give her time to recover herself, walked to the window and stood for some moments looking out. When he turned around, Louise had at least nerved herself to meet what she felt was imminent.

The prince approached her deliberately. She knew what he was going to say.

"Louise," he began, drawing a chair to her side. "I have found myself thinking a great deal about you during the last few weeks."

She did not interrupt him. She simply waited and watched.

"I have come to a certain determination," he proceeded; "one which, if you will grace it with your approval, will give me great happiness. I ask you to forget certain things which have passed between us. I have come to you today to beg you to do me the honor of becoming my wife."

She turned her head very slowly until she was looking him full in the face. Her lips were a little parted, her eyes a little strained. The prince was leaning toward her in a conventional attitude; his words had been spoken simply and in his usual conversational manner. There was something about him, however, profoundly convincing.

"Your wife!" Louise repeated.

"If you will do me that great honor."

It seemed at first as if her nerves were strained to the breaking-point. The situation was one with which her brain seemed unable to grapple. She set her teeth tightly. Then she had a sudden interlude of wonderful clear-sightedness. She was almost cool.

"You must forgive my surprise, Eugene," she begged. "We have known each other now for some twelve years, have we not—and I believe that this is the first time you have ever hinted at anything of the sort!"

"One gathers wisdom, perhaps, with the years," he replied. "I am forty-one years old today. I have spent the early hours of this afternoon in reflection, and behold the result!"

"You have spoken to me before," she said slowly, "of different things. You

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even to the most wonderful audience in the world. I do not want to shake hands with many hundreds of people at that hateful reception. I think I want nothing else in the world but you!"

"You are too late, Eugene!" she said. "I almost loved you. I was almost yours to do whatever you liked with. But somehow, somewhere, notwithstanding all your worldly knowledge and mine, we missed it. We do not know the truth about life, you and I—at least you do not, and I did not."

He rose very slowly to his feet. There was no visible change in his face save a slight whitening of the cheeks.

"And the sequel to this?" he asked.

"I have promised to marry John Strangewy," she told him.

"That," he replied, "is impossible! I have a prior claim."

The light of battle flamed suddenly in her eyes. Her nervousness had gone. She was a strong woman, face to face with him now, taller than he, seeming, indeed, to tower over him in the splendor of her anger. She was like a lioness threatened with the loss of the one dear thing.

"Assert it, then," she cried defiantly. "Do what you will. Go to him this minute, if you have courage enough, if it seems to you well. Claim, indeed! Right! I have the one right every woman in the world possesses—to give herself, body and soul, to the man she loves! That is the only claim and the only right I recognize, and I am giving myself to him, when he wants me, forever!"

She stopped suddenly. Neither of them had heard a discreet knock at the door. Alaine had entered with the tea. There was a moment of silence.

"Put it down here by my side, Alaine," her mistress ordered, "and show the prince of Seyre out."

Alaine held the door open. For a single moment the prince hesitated. Then he picked up his hat and bowed.

"Perhaps," he said, "this may not be the last word!"

CHAPTER XIX.

John came back to town from his Cumberland home, telling himself that all had gone as well as he had expected. He had done his duty. He had told Stephen his news, and they had parted friends. Yet all the time he was conscious of an undercurrent of disconcerting thoughts.

Louise met him at the station, and he fancied that her expression, too, although she welcomed him gallantly enough, was a little anxious.

"Well," she asked, as she took his arm and led him to where her limousine was waiting. "What did that terrible brother of yours say?"

John made a little grimace.

"It might have been worse," he declared. "Stephen wasn't pleased, of course. He hates women like poison, and he always will. That is because he will insist upon dwelling upon certain unhappy incidents of our family history."

"I shall never forget the morning he came to call on me," Louise sighed. "He threatened all sorts of terrible things if I did not give you up."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?" John asked.

"I thought it might worry you," she replied. "And it couldn't do any good. He believed he was doing his duty. John, you are sure about yourself, aren't you?"

He was a little startled by the earnestness of her words. She seemed pale and fragile, her eyes larger and deeper than usual, and her mouth tremulous. She was like a child with the shadow of some fear hanging over her. He laughed and held her tightly to him.

Her lips sought his and clung to them. A queer little wave of passion seemed to have seized her. Half crying, half laughing, she pressed her face against his. "I do not want to act tonight. I do not want to play,

even to the most wonderful audience in the world. I do not want to shake hands with many hundreds of people at that hateful reception. I think I want nothing else in the world but you!"

She lay, for a moment, passive in his arms. He smoothed her hair and kissed her tenderly. Then he led her back to her place upon the couch. Her emotional mood, while it flattered him in a sense, did nothing to quiet the little demons of unrest that pulled, every now and then, at his heart-strings.

"What is this reception?" he asked. She made a little grimace.

Her Lips Sought His and Clung to Them.

"It is a formal welcome from the English stage to the French company that has come over to play at the new French theater," she told him. "Sir Edward and I are to receive them. You will come, will you not? I am the hostess of the evening."

"Then I am not likely to refuse, am I?" he asked, smiling. "Shall I come to the theater?"

"Come straight to the reception at the Whitehall rooms," she begged. "Sir Edward is calling for me, and Grailiot will go down with us. Later, if you care to, you can drive me home."

"Don't you think," he suggested, "that it would be rather a good opportunity to announce our engagement?"

"Not tonight!" she pleaded. "You know, I cannot seem to believe it myself except when I am with you and we are alone. It seems too wonderful after all these years. Do you know, John, that I am nearly thirty?"

He laughed.

"How pathetic! All the more reason, I should say, why we should let people know about it as soon as possible."

"There is no particular hurry," she said, a little nervously. "Let me get used to it myself. I don't think you will have to wait long. Everything I have been used to doing and thinking seems to be crumbling up around me. Last night I even hated my work, or at least part of it."

His eyes lit up with genuine pleasure.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear you say that," he declared. "I don't hate your work—I've got over that. I don't think I am narrow about it. I admire Grailiot, and his play is wonderful. But I think, and I always shall think, that the denouement in that third act is abominable!"